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AUTHOR Roth, Audrey J.
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ABSTRACT

With the advent of composition software, the microcomputer has become a valuable writing and teaching tool. In "Writing with a Word Processor" (Harper, 1983), William Zinsser details the trauma he experienced in the shift from being a pencil and paper writer to being a computer writer. However, those accustomed to composing at a typewriter will have less difficulty. When buying a personal computer for home or school use, the teacher should shop around and talk with other computer owners to find the machine and software best suited to the writers' needs. There are five steps to becoming a "computer expert" before buying: (1) sit down and become familiar with the computer, (2) meet with people who know that model of computer well, (3) learn computer jargon and lingo, (4) read computer related articles in computer magazines and professional journals, and (5) ask what the computer can do for specific writing needs. (HTH)

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Audrey J. Roth
SCETC, Feb. 16, 1984
Washington, D.C.

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# BABE IN TOYLAND---OR, HOW I STOPPED LOOKING AND LEARNED TO START LIVING WITH A COMPUTER

I read from my actual log: "Tuesday, May 4. C day---went to look at computer advertised as special---decided to buy it---chose friction feed printer---got cap and lc capability put in---went home with high hopes---unpacked and set up the pieces---started reading the manuals---and went crazy"

And that's exactly what happened. I bought the first computer I looked at. Everybody who knows anything about computers will tell you that's wrong. "Begin by looking around," most folks will repeat. "Talk with people who own computers." "Go to computer stores---or the computer room in your school---and ask for demonstrations," they'd say. I'd tell you the same thing myself today. That I bought a computer and printer suitable for my needs was more chance than considered choice.

But let me back up.

Until a few years ago, computers (to me) took just two forms. One was the unseen giants that daily sent to my mailbox either bills or letters that began "Dear Audrey" from people I

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never heard of and who never heard of me, let alone know me well enough to be on a first-name basis. In its other form, a computer meant the monster housed in a glass-walled temperature and humidity controlled room on the first floor of a building at my college--a machine fed bubbled-in cards that magically turned into printed test scores and student schedules. All computers suggested to me mathematics--patently an impossible discipline for me to deal with--and engineering--which was certainly beyond my ken.

But then came microcomputers. My niece was mesmerized by the games she played on one at home. Two or three colleagues in other parts of the country became owners of the new whiz machines, and sang their praises. One was soon developing and marketing programs that taught writing skills. I started attending the few sessions on computers at NCTE, SCETC and CCCC. The toy turned out to have legitimate teaching potential and, for me, a real use. I began paying attention to the articles on computers in the weaving magazines I subscribe to. (After all, the first computer, the prototype of the computer on which I am writing this presentation, was the Jacquard loom that first began weaving fabric in 1805.)

And then came C day--computer day-- for me: a change in the way I view computers and certainly a change in the way I write. Toyland turned out to be not never-never land but a corner of my den and the toy became a tool I didn't know I needed until I acquired it.

I read again from my log: "Friday, May 7 [three days after C day] . . . Now the computer works and I can get into the

editing mode---but the whole thing doesn't make sense because, except for getting the plus sign cursor, I can't try out the things they tell me to do because the screen is filled by the instructions and doesn't leave any room to try things out."

Over the weekend I must have figured out how to cope with some of the problems because on Tuesday, May 11 I wrote, "It's just like the old days when we used to run home for lunch to watch the TV set. I was home for lunch and couldn't resist trying out the word processor and ended up being late getting back to school because I was diddling with the machine."

And so I began using my computer for the purpose I bought it---word processing. Log. "Friday, May 21. I am finally getting the hang of finding keys in some different places [that is, different from on the typewriter], of not hitting the return key, and of reading on the screen. I feel really comfortable about the editing aspect of this and with just a couple of hours of work at it." And, a week later from my log: "Thursday, May 27. It's finally easier to write on the computer than on the typewriter. The difference is in getting used to moving stuff around on the video screen rather than simply with a pencil or on the typewriter. I find I'm doing more editing as I go on the computer than on the typewriter." And later in that entry: "Horror of horrors! I find myself being able to talk computer jargon. The first time I used the word 'interface' was on the phone with Judy [my sister] a couple of weeks ago, and I apologized before saying it. 'Initialize' still sticks in the gullet. 'User friendly' is a wonderful euphemism and was surely developed to make the machine seem more human. Shades of HAL! . . ."

William Zinsser, in WRITING WITH A WORD PROCESSOR (Harper's, 1983), details his trauma in the shift from being a pencil and paper writer to being a computer writer. I experienced no such problems, since I have composed on a typewriter since college. As an advertising copywriter, I usually worked under tight deadlines with little time for editing. I was in the midst of writing my second books when I made the marvelous shift from manual to electric typewriter. And though I use the computer for much of my writing these days, the typewriter is more convenient to my desk and I use it still for most correspondence.

The big break-through for me in a "relationship" --if you can call it that!-- to the computer did not come until several months after I was pushing the right buttons to write as I wished. I still didn't understand the principle of what I was doing. Not the inner workings, the microchips and circuits and other exotica that come into view when I take off the lid of the computer. Not even the relationship of disk to computer to printer. The book that finally explained to me--in language I could understand-- the actual process of why I had to push an "S" or an "E" or a "P" to get a piece of writing from my head and out the printer is titled THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO COMPUTERS (by Robin Bradbeer, Peter De Bono, and Peter Laurie; Addison-Wesley, 1982) and it was originally written to accompany a series of TV programs called the "BBC Computer Literacy Project." Once I learned from that book how my words typed at the keyboard are stored inside the computer until transfered to a disk, and how a piece of writing can be moved from the disk into the computer and

then from the computer out through the printer, I was even able to cope with the computer's occasional recalcitrance in doing what I wanted.

That brings me to the first of my "5 Ways to Become an Instant Computer Expert."

1. MEET A COMPUTER. Sit down in front of a computer and find out how you can type on it. Don't be intimidated. Have someone show you how to do a few simple things such as typing in a paragraph or so and moving a word from one place in a sentence to another, correcting misspelling, inserting a word or a punctuation mark here and there. Watch the wonder of spaces that change to accommodate what you're writing. Print out the clean copy and put it in a prominent place on your desk for a couple of days.

If you don't have anybody handy to show you how to use the computer as word processor---that is, as a combination typewriter/editor/printer---or if you are someone who would rather learn such things by yourself, sit at a computer with the manual for a word processing program and work your way through the instructions.

Or, try out a computer program in English or another subject you understand. Most schools have several by now. If you don't have time to do this (or the word processing) during school hours, do it at a local computer store. Most are glad to help a potential customer.

Like "writer's block" or "writing anxiety," "computerphobia" is very real for many people, both our colleagues and our

students. Getting to know the computer as just another machine that can be dealt with is a way of overcoming any antipathy (or fear).

2. MEET THE PEOPLE WHO KNOW YOUR COMPUTER BETTER THAN YOU DO. No matter how often you use a computer or how much you learn about it, there are people around you who have been at it longer and know more than you do. Meet them. Talk with them. They may be colleagues in your own department or in offices down the hall. They may be people in an instructional computing department or division. They may be people in audiovisual services. The important thing is to find out who the folks are in your school who can act as resource people for you.

"User groups" are people who share a common interest in computers, usually because they own (or operate) the same make of computer (Apple, IBM, Atari, etc.). Another kind of user group is made up of people with a common concern---such as academic instruction. Some colleges have such user groups of faculty, of students, or of both. The faculty user group on my campus does not meet very regularly, but we have had a chance to discover how computers are being used in several departments and had several programs I've found very informative. Mostly, though, the group has made it possible for us to meet each other and thus establish faculty resource persons on an informal basis.

3. LEARN THE LINGO. You can't sound like an expert until you know the jargon--and the toyland that is computers has plenty of it! PLATO, ASCII, MECC, NECC, TOPOI, CREATE, bits and bytes, ROMs and RAMs---it's a whole new world of words and, particularly, of acronyms. Some computer programs, I'm

convinced, are the result of somebody thinking up an acronym and then writing a program to fit it. If you don't plan on being very technical, or becoming involved in the mechanics of computers, you will find it rather easy to learn enough "computerese" to sound as if you're an expert----or almost. Many books about computers have glossaries, and you can browse through them to get a notion of what you may want to know.

I still feel traitorous every time I say the word "initialize," but that's the term that means preparing a disk to accept the code that allows you to record information on it. So if you want to express the idea you need to use the word. And learning the words is part of learning about computers, just as learning the vocabulary is a starting place for any other study.

4. GET THE WORD. Not just the language that's special for computers, but also the billions of English words that are being written about them. Find out where all the computer magazine subscriptions are going in your school and track some of them down. Many publications will be far more technical than you probably want to be. They're addressed to "hackers" and technicians and people interested principally in the hardware. It's worth leafing through a couple of copies just to get some sense of the extent and complexity of microcomputers.

If you have been reading your copies of CCC journal and of COLLEGE ENGLISH, you are already getting the word. But there are also a growing number of magazines for educators, and even some specifically for language arts teachers. Here are some of them. [DISTRIBUTE BIBLIOGRAPHY]

Make it a point to get three magazines or journals and read

at least two articles in each of them. Don't limit yourself to articles specifically about English, but browse through some that have nothing to do with what you teach. Even if you don't understand the details of the articles at first, you will soon begin to develop a "feel" for what teachers are doing with computers and, even more, what unbelievable capabilities computers have. Be sure to look at the ads in the magazines, too. They are as informative to a novice as many of the articles.

5. ASK NOT WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR YOUR COMPUTER BUT WHAT YOUR COMPUTER CAN DO FOR YOU. A computer is a tool--for you and for your students. Fortunately, you can use the tool without knowing how to build the thing yourself. That is, you can use a computer in many ways without knowing how to program one. (A program is all the step by step instructions that make a computer behave as word processor or as prompter for studying sentence structure--or, in fact, do the many things that computers do.) Some English teachers want to learn to write programs and, indeed, many become so fascinated with the possibilities that they end up writing programs for their students. But, I know programming is NOT the way to get acquainted with computers.

Instead, invest your time in listening. Attend computer sessions at conventions such as SCETC and CCCC. There are certainly plenty of them now! Listen to what people are saying at meetings or in hallways between sessions or in the bar. Butt in. Ask questions. Most computer users are enthusiastic enough about the machine not to mind the questions and are anxious to share what they know.

Another way to learn about what the computer can do for you is to attend a workshop, even if it's only for one day. Of course, workshops at English meetings are keyed to our particular interests, but there are many computer workshops around the country. You'll find lots of them announced in the educational computing magazines, especially now that people are starting to make plans for summer. You will learn so much in a concentrated package that you, too, can become an instant expert!

So much for my five ways to become an instant computer expert. What has been the result of having this magical, marvelous, miraculous toy in my home? It has been rather like the discoveries I made when I first got my microwave oven ten years ago--- or when I got call waiting on my telephone just a few months ago. I never knew how much I needed any of them (including the computer!) until I got them.

The last sentence in my log (written about two months after C-day) reads: "I can see that it would be worthwhile to take some courses in order to get the most good out of having the computer in the house." And I did take a programming course from which I learned three things: 1) what is really meant by "computer languages," 2) how to read a program, and 3) that I am not interested in programming original material.

The computer has made my work at school easier. No more retyping dittoes to get clean copies or to make minor changes on handouts. Now I write for school on the computer, store everything on disks, and keep dittoes at home. So, whenever I am ready to distribute something to students, I run the ditto on my

printer, then take it to school to be run off. And I've learned to carry the disk along, too. In case the ditto machine doesn't work properly and chews or folds my paper, I can easily print another ditto at school.

I continue to use my computer almost exclusively for word processing---which is why I bought it. What I didn't anticipate was how tne computer would change the way I write. (Shades of Marshall McLuhan!) I do much more editing as I write on the computer than I did when composing on the typewriter. It's so much easier to add, delete, move things around on the computer than it is to stop the typewriter, turn the platen, pencil in things here and there, or run arrows and lines all over the paper. However, I still need to see a whole document in order to do serious editing; I can't work exclusively from the CRT screen. Therefore, after the first draft is on a disk, I need to get a hard copy from the printer and work at it with a pencil. However, changes are easy to transfer into the document via the computer. And then there's the marvel of not having to retype a whole piece! Just push a button and out it comes.

Because I no longer have to spend time retyping a readable copy, I tend to put off finishing of a paper such as this more than I used to. The first time I wrote a presentation on the computer, I didn't print out the finished copy until 3 a.m. of the morning that I was leaving for the conference. And then, I was taking clothes out of the dryer and folding them while the printer was churning out the pages. As my sister said, it was the first time she ever heard of a machine freeing a woman for housework!